AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

MEDIA EMBEDS: BALANCING OPERATIONS SECURITY WITH PUBLIC NEED TO KNOW

by

John J. Sheets, Maj, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Lt Col Diane C. Ficke

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2009

1. REPORT DATE **APR 2009**	2. REPORT TYPE **N/A**	3. DATES COVERED **-**	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Media Embeds: Balancing Operations Security with Public Need to Know**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
		5b. GRANT NUMBER	
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
		5e. TASK NUMBER	
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Air Command And Staff College Air University Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release, distribution unlimited**			
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES			

14. ABSTRACT

The U.S. militarys desire to protect its forces and operations is at odds with the medias mission to report the news. Commanders must find the appropriate balance between operations security (OPSEC) and supporting media access. The military practices operations security in order to preserve the element of surprise and safeguard friendly forces. Open media access on the other hand seemingly flies in the face of the militarys need for secrecy. In reality, however, the military and the media need each other in order to accomplish their missions, despite their divergent interests. The media ground rules established for media embeds in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) offer a set of security controls that commanders may use to protect their forces and operations. They are a starting point where commanders and embeds can develop a mutual understanding regarding the release of information. Depending upon how the relationship developed between the commander and embed during the opening stages of OIF, journalists were privy to classified information which afforded them greater context and background for the operation they were covering. By trusting journalists with classified and sensitive information, commanders mitigated the inadvertent release of such information and ultimately strengthened its operations security. Since Operation Enduring Freedom and OIF are still ongoing, the Air Force has a multitude of options where it can embed media under the set ground rules to tell the services story without compromising OPSEC and placing forces at risk.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**SAR**	**29**	

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Abstract

The U.S. military's desire to protect its forces and operations is at odds with the media's mission to report the news. Commanders must find the appropriate balance between operations security (OPSEC) and supporting media access. The military practices operations security in order to preserve the element of surprise and safeguard friendly forces. Open media access on the other hand seemingly flies in the face of the military's need for secrecy. In reality, however, the military and the media need each other in order to accomplish their missions, despite their divergent interests.

The media ground rules established for media embeds in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) offer a set of "security controls" that commanders may use to protect their forces and operations. They are a starting point where commanders and embeds can develop a mutual understanding regarding the release of information. Depending upon how the relationship developed between the commander and embed during the opening stages of OIF, journalists were privy to classified information which afforded them greater context and background for the operation they were covering. By trusting journalists with classified and sensitive information, commanders mitigated the inadvertent release of such information and ultimately strengthened its operations security.

Since Operation Enduring Freedom and OIF are still ongoing, the Air Force has a multitude of options where it can embed media under the set ground rules to tell the service's story without compromising OPSEC and placing forces at risk.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, operations security (OPSEC) assumed

greater importance in planning and executing military operations. America was at war with an

elusive enemy – terrorism. While Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri stood as al Qaeda's

front men, the faceless terrorist cells were tactical threats to U.S. forces both at home station and

deployed. When the U.S. military launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), it reserved

discussing the full spectrum of its operations. Media coverage was further limited in that

journalists initially lacked access to the battlefield and those forces fighting the war. There were

several reasons for this. First, because of host nation sensitivities, some countries were unwilling

or unable to expend political capital by openly showing support for OEF. The sheer distance

between air bases or ships and their targets in Afghanistan further hindered coverage. Primarily

though, OEF's opening stages were conducted by special operations forces. The Pentagon

leadership's going-in premise was that the Global War on Terror was an unconventional war and

the media would not enjoy a desired amount of access to the fight. Press coverage of special

operations activities could jeopardize safety and lives. Putting it bluntly, Victoria Clarke, then-

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said, "There would be some things that nobody

could or should see."[1] As conventional forces entered combat, media access to U.S. forces

increased. There were some missteps such as the quarantining of a media pool to prevent

coverage of casualties from a B-52 friendly fire incident. However, the commander who had

"boots on the ground" made this decision locally, not pressure from leadership back in

Washington, D.C.[2]

When the United States turned its attention to Iraq, the Department of Defense (DOD)

had a better opportunity to engage the press. The character of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

was largely different from OEF. Whereas special operations forces comprised the initial main

effort in Afghanistan, conventional forces would have that role in OIF. In developing OIF's

media plan, the DOD and U.S. Central Command could "weaponize" reporters to counter enemy

propaganda while also telling the military's story. With the intent of providing unfettered access

to embedded reporters, the commanders were understandably concerned over "the potential for

the inadvertent release of classified or sensitive information by embeds – information that would

compromise a mission or affect the safety of military personnel."[3] Likewise, media were

concerned about how much access they would actually have once combat operations began.[4]

Secretary of Defense-issued Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) spelled out ground rules for

the commanders, Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), and the 700 embedded reporters. The

extensive set of ground rules established categories of releasable information, coverage of

casualties, use of satellite phones and much more. The PAG was only a starting point.

Depending upon the relationship developed between the unit commander and embedded reporter,

journalists were privy to classified information which afforded them greater context and

background for the operation they were covering. Such acts were not historically unprecedented.

In an October 1996 speech at the Air War College, Joe Galloway said:

> There was precisely one reporter who went to war with a personal recommendation from General H. Norman Schwarzkopf in his hip pocket, and you're looking at him. Thanks to that trust, I was sent down to the 24th Mech two weeks before G-day. On my first night there, the Division [Commanding General] called me to his [Tactical Operations Center] and pulled the cover off the battle map. What he said, as my eyes followed the arrows and the hair stood up on the back of my neck was this: I trust you because Schwarzkopf trusts you; but more than that, I trust you because you're coming with me. I never heard a more compelling argument for operational security in my life.[5]

This indicates an understanding and willingness on the media's part to avoid compromising

OPSEC. During the second Gulf War, most of the 700 embedded reporters had similar exposure

to classified or sensitive information, which afforded them greater operational insight. Fortunately, for the rare cases when embedded reporters did compromise OPSEC, it did not affect the overall operation.

The DOD has a mandate to provide timely and truthful information to the American public while simultaneously safeguarding its operations and tactics, techniques and procedures from prying enemies. This paper argues that media embedding, conducted under the ground rules established for OIF, is a comprehensive tool the U.S. Air Force can use to communicate its roles and responsibilities in the joint fight while still adhering to the commander's OPSEC needs.

The embed PAG ground rules issued in 2003 are still relevant and applicable today. With ongoing operations in Iraq, media embedding is still a viable option for generating news coverage there. The Air Force garnered drastically less coverage from media embeds during the initial months of OIF compared to its sister services. Host nation restrictions on media access to air bases are partially to blame, but also it was not feasible to put reporters in most combat aircraft. Since the Air Force has assumed a greater role in operations in Iraq, especially on the ground, embedding becomes a viable opportunity for the service to highlight its contributions and relevancy. Embedding reporters with Air Mobility Command (AMC) aircrews is another possibility. Finally, embedded reporters can become a force multiplier for the PAO; one can reduce the media escort requirement for the PAOs thereby freeing them to work other outreach opportunities.

Operations Security Challenges

There is extensive research on the tenuous relationship between the military and the media. While both have missions to serve the public, the manner in which each achieves its objectives is at odds with the other. To provide for the protection and defense of the United

States, the military practices OPSEC throughout the planning and execution of its missions in

order to preserve the element of surprise and safeguard friendly forces. Joint Publication 3-13.3,

Operations Security, describes OPSEC as:

> A process that identifies critical information to determine if friendly actions can
> be observed by adversary intelligence systems, determines if information obtained
> by adversaries could be interpreted to be useful to them, and then executes
> selected measures that eliminate or reduce adversary exploitation of friendly
> critical information.[6]

The overarching goal of OPSEC is to improve mission effectiveness by eliminating one's

vulnerabilities. As the United States is an open, liberal democracy, many of the U.S. military's

actions, be it in a training or operational environment, are susceptible to observation by both the

public and the enemy. "Although much of this information may be unclassified, when correlated

with other bits of unclassified information, they may become classified or revealing of a

sensitive operation."[7] This introduces a level of risk that the commander must address. By

analyzing and understanding what actions an enemy can observe and synthesize, commanders

can mitigate the threat to their forces.

As previously stated, the military's desire to protect its forces and operations is at odds

with the media's mission to report the news. In going about its business, the media function as a

"4th Estate" or government watchdog. "Although not a formal part of the government, [the

media] continues to play an important role for democracy by reporting on the process and

outcomes of the government."[8] There are historical anecdotes of how press reporting

inadvertently compromised OPSEC. During World War II, the *Chicago Tribune* printed an

article revealing that the Allies had broken the code used by Japanese naval forces.[9] Media

reports of "tank plinking" during Operation Desert Storm – the Air Force's ability to use aircraft

equipped with infrared targeting pods to find and attack dug-in Iraqi armor – drew the ire of

military commanders for compromising tactics and potentially even helping the Iraqis.[10]

What has changed from World War II to Operation Desert Storm is the speed at which media glean information from the battlefield and are able to report it. The continued development of communications technology has translated into a capability where the media can broadcast live from a combat zone. Fortunately, mainstream media comprehend the reach and impact of their reporting. For example, CNN opted to safeguard OPSEC during Operation Uphold Democracy when it delayed broadcasting the departure of Haiti-bound aircraft. Executive Vice President Ed Turner defended that decision in a *New York Times* editorial saying, "Our reality is that citizens everywhere can watch what we report as it is happening. Unlike the print process, our work is instantly available to global eyes: friend, foe, neutral alike."[11] The military cannot always rely on this level of self-censorship, however.

"The speed and geographical coverage of satellite communications have thus rendered obsolete the traditional security controls over reporters' stories, by eliminating opportunities to review the copy before dissemination."[12] Armed with digital cameras and satellite telephones, embedded reporters streamed imagery of their convoy from Kuwait to Baghdad during OIF as they navigated *featureless* terrain. OPSEC becomes even more challenging given that this technology is available and affordable. Blogging and websites like iReport.com turn ordinary people into amateur journalists. Again, the military cannot expect there to be any type of security controls to be in place, especially for information and imagery collected during operations in foreign countries. Rather, commanders must take factors like these into account when working through the OPSEC process. The embed PAG ground rules are a new set of "security controls" commanders may use to protect their forces and operations. The military and the media need each other in order to accomplish their missions, despite their divergent interests.

Tell Your Story

Although there would appear to be a tendency for service members to avoid talking with the press in the name of OPSEC, the media actually can be a conduit to reach the American public, allies, and adversaries. Engaging the media helps the military gain and maintain public support. Media engagement can also be a global deterrent. Reports of soldiers preparing to deploy, aircraft weapons loading, and warships heading out to sea show U.S. resolve. "As with the recent 'shock and awe' campaign accompanying the opening of the war in Iraq, coverage that demonstrates the performance and professionalism of the U.S. military to citizens at home also demonstrates those intimidating qualities to the enemy."[13] It is at this point, where one can see a convergence between the military and media objectives. Through this symbiotic relationship, the military can use the media in an information operations (IO) capacity to build public support and deter the enemy. Meanwhile, the media fulfills its obligation to the American people by reporting on the military.

The DOD Principles of Information call for maximum disclosure of releasable information with minimal delay. This does not mean total disclosure with no delay. Commanders must carefully balance OPSEC requirements with other IO needs during planning. Victoria Clarke said, "[The DOD's] primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of our troops and the successes of their missions – a goal journalists have almost universally respected. In the process of fulfilling that duty, we have, arguably, erred frequently on the side of caution. And journalists have – rightly – pushed for more access to the war than the department has thought it appropriate to give them."[14] For reporters to do their job properly, they must be able to gain access to the story. Therein lays the problem as media access opens the military to a spectrum of risk. At one end of the spectrum, media reporting generates coverage that supports a

commander's IO objectives. At the other end, reporting could compromise OPSEC and cost lives and equipment. Commanders must find the appropriate balance for an issue where there are no fixed rules.[15] "If it comes down to absolutely an operational security versus press access issue, military people will put the mission first, but they very much think that maintaining public support through the intercession and reporting of the media is essential to the long-term success."[16] Such was the case for the U.S. military when it began OEF operations in Afghanistan.

OEF Media Access And Coverage

When OEF began, the military had an overwhelming need for OPSEC so that special operations forces could conduct missions against Taliban and al Qaeda militants. While press access to forces fighting in Afghanistan during the beginning of OEF was not feasible, the DOD accommodated reporters where it could. "On the first night of air strikes, 39 journalists from 26 news organizations were aboard U.S. Navy ships involved in the operation. Another 100 were on the flight line when C-17s returned from the first drops of humanitarian rations."[17] Reporters did not have direct access to those forces who had "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan during the beginning of OEF. Nevertheless, the DOD found a balance between OPSEC and media access and granted interviews up and down the chain of command where it could.

As conventional forces entered the combat zone, so did more reporters. Besides granting access to U.S. Navy ships, reporters flew along with E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System patrols and aboard aerial refueling tankers supporting combat air patrols.[18] Tying media outreach to IO, the Air Force flew Music Television News correspondent Gideon Yago during a C-17 humanitarian airdrop missions in December 2001. Highlighting this humanitarian effort to younger audiences worldwide showed that the United States was not at war with the Afghan

people or Islam. This could have arguably mitigated anti-war protests, but one cannot prove a

negative. Despite these efforts, access and coverage of the special operations forces would

remain a point of contention between the military and media.[19]

Embeds

The balance between OPSEC and media access for OIF heavily tilted towards access.

The media would play a wholly different role during this fight. Rather than simply covering the

war from the rear, the press would have front row seats by embedding with the coalition units.

"Communications would be a top priority … not as a public relations imperative but as a military

one."[20] Embedding would satiate the media's access to the forces fighting the war, but more

importantly support the military's strategy:

> Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public
> perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This
> holds true for the U.S. public; the public in allied countries whose opinion can
> affect the durability of our coalition; and publics in countries where we conduct
> operations, whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our
> involvement. Our ultimate strategic success in bringing the peace and security to
> this region will come in our long-term commitment to supporting our democratic
> ideals. We need to tell the factual story – good or bad – before others seed the
> media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to
> do.[21]

Pentagon leadership considered IO vital for successful prosecution of the war. Besides

highlighting the professionalism of the U.S. military and the precautions it exercises to limit

civilian casualties and collateral damage, the media would serve as a factual counter to enemy

propaganda. "Saddam was the mother of all liars. His propaganda machine – which would

shape world opinion, especially the vaunted 'Arab street' – would affect our ability to hold the

coalition together, especially strategically critical allies in the Middle East."[22] By having the

press present throughout the operation across the operational area, they could separate fact from

the Iraqi propaganda machine's fiction. Likewise, if there were instances of where coalition

forces inadvertently killed innocent civilians, the media afforded a sense of transparency.[23]

Again, the media would be present to report the truth. Not only allowing media access to combat forces, but actually embedding them, served the DOD's ultimate purpose of ensuring the American people knew about its military and its performance. "If there's one aspect of their government that they should care about, though, it's the military," Victoria Clarke said. "And we did everything possible to make their military accessible to them."[24]

The DOD established an extensive set of ground rules for the media embeds to abide by in order to ensure OPSEC. Practicing security at the source is the basis for any media engagement. To safeguard coalition forces further, the ground rules instituted an embargo that banned live reporting from air base flightlines until the first strike aircraft returned from their missions.[25] Other restrictions prohibited discussing specific numbers of people, aircraft, vehicles, and ships in order to maintain operational and tactical surprise. Additionally, media were not to report on the effectiveness of enemy actions as this could provide a form of Battle Damage Assessment for the Iraqi regime.

There were similar restrictions for reporting on casualties. While reporters could cover casualties, they could not identify the victim until 72 hours after the casualty occurred or until the Services notified the next-of-kin. Additionally, photographs and video could not show any of the casualties' identifying features. Having embedded reporters on the frontline helped families back home keep track of their loved ones. This had both positive and negative implications. Gordon Dillow, a reporter from the Orange County Register, embedded with a Marine infantry unit – Alpha Company, First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. He said, "It was a sensible rule, but I also knew that back home a large network of First Battalion, Fifth Marines families were following our reports in the paper and on the Internet – and when I reported that the battalion had

suffered an unidentified [Killed in Action] or [Wounded in Action] I knew it could, and did, cause all of them great anxiety."[26]

Col Glen Starnes, who served as a U.S. Marine Corps battalion commander during OIF, suggested that the ground rules were overwhelming and unfamiliar. "At the tactical level, commanders and reporters used common sense to determine what could be reported and when a reporter could transmit or 'go live.'"[27] However, it was vitally important to have a formal set of ground rules for the press. For some reporters, OIF was their first experience in covering the military, let alone covering a war. By providing the media with a list of "do's and don'ts," reporters had a baseline of knowledge to work from that would help prevent compromising a unit's safety and security. Col Starnes was correct in referencing the relationship between the reporter and unit commander. Frequent dialogue between the two served to avoid any misunderstandings.

Even unilateral reporters working in Iraq were able to take advantage of the media access made possible by the embed program. Jonathan Landay and Tom Pennington with Knight Ridder News Service twice embedded with U.S. Special Forces. The two struck an agreement with the unit's commander: they could cover what they wished to but not report on the unit's designation, code words, or personal names.[28] Landay said, "We watched the unit's mortar and sniper teams in action. This chance meeting opened for Knight Ridder readers a rare window in the professionalism and dedication of some of their country's most coveted warriors. It allowed the Special Forces members themselves to tell the American public something about what they do."[29] The extensive ground rules were enough to provide a starting point for the reporters and commanders to build rapport with one another.

According to the Institute for Defense Analysis' report "Assessment of the DOD

Embedded Media Program," about 70 percent of the commanders gave their embedded reporters access to classified or sensitive information.[30] Different command philosophies dictated just how much unfettered access a reporter would have. Some reporters became "part of the team" as they built rapport with their units. Other embeds had open access from the beginning until they demonstrated they could not be trusted to safeguard the information they were privy to.[31] One commander commented, "If you don't let the embed in on the plan, you have no idea what he will write. He may figure out some of the details of an operation on his own by observing what is going on or talking to soldiers and then write about it. So it is better to provide him the information and have him delay releasing it."[32] This represents the best-case scenario where the commander has a trustworthy journalist.

Unfortunately, there were instances where the media violated the ground rules. Of the 700 media who embedded for OIF, only 26 involuntary disembedded for violating the agreed-upon ground rules.[33] One reporter discussed future coalition operations while sketching a map on the ground during a broadcast.[34] Another continued using his Thuraya satellite phone after the military determined that the phone's Global Positioning System capability could compromise friendly troops locations and subsequently issued a directive to stop using them.[35] While these types of issues could have had consequences at the tactical level, they were not damaging at the operational and strategic levels.

OIF Media Access And Coverage

Of the 700 reporters participating in the embed program, 332 were with the Army, 210 were with the Marines, 110 were with the Navy, and 25 were with Special Forces.[36] Ground units absorbed the bulk of the media embeds because of the large number of operational units that were on hand to push into Iraq. Since the ground units had the preponderance of embeds,

this obviously meant that the Army and Marines garnered the most press coverage. In accordance with the rationale behind the OIF media plan, it was of greater importance to have those reporters with ground forces, as they would be the ones in direct contact with the Iraqi population. Fortunately, factual reporting trumped Iraqi propaganda as predicted. For example, Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf's press conferences – lampooned as "Baghdad Bob" – became laughable as coalition forces moved into Baghdad.

The Air Force benefited considerably less than its sister services from embed reports during OIF's initial phases. Although the Coalition Press Information Center (CPIC) operated out of Kuwait City and ground units were staging in northern Kuwait for the push into Iraq, it was questionable as to whether or not the Kuwaitis would permit media access to its air bases. Host nation approval was a sticking point for other air bases throughout the area of operations. During initial planning, the Air Force had agreed to hosting 83 reporters. When host nation approval fell through, the number dropped to 24.[37]

By late February 2003, the Kuwaitis lifted their restriction. The 386th Air Expeditionary Wing (386 AEW) was the host unit for Ali Al Salem Air Base. The wing's only operational unit there was an MQ-1 Predator squadron, which had been providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) for Operation Southern Watch. A conglomeration of other sister and coalition units operated from Ali Al Salem Air Base including a Marine helicopter wing, a Naval construction battalion, and a Royal Air Force (RAF) Tornado unit. The 386 AEW had two general assignment journalists, one from the *Miami Herald* and the other from the *Houston Chronicle*. The Marine and RAF units had embedded reporters as well.

Both embeds received an initial overview of the Predator squadron's mission and the unmanned aerial vehicle's capabilities. Other than conducting interviews with the squadron's

commander, aircrew, and maintainers, embedding with the squadron was not a viable option.

The PAG stated upfront that the news media representatives were not to have access to classified

information.[38] With that restriction in place, once a Predator was underway, it was on a

classified mission. This issue ties back to the importance of the commanders and reporters

building rapport. There were difficulties in trying to accomplish that with these two reporters.

Further, the squadron commander was media savvy. He supported numerous CPIC-sponsored

media visits during the weeks between the Government of Kuwait allowing press access to its air

bases and the beginning of OIF. The best option available to the reporters was to embed them in

the multitude of 386 AEW support units on a two-week rotational basis. One reporter started

with the services squadron, the other went to the civil engineer squadron. Neither reporter was

pleased with the situation; especially after learning that the Marine's embeds were flying on

assault missions. Rather, they pressed to "Go North." A critique of DOD's embed program has

been that the reporters in the field were only getting a "soda straw" view of the war.[39] For the

386 AEW's embeds, this meant that their view would be limited to Air Force support operations,

which did not entail forward deploying at the time.

In their frustration and attempts to get to Iraq, neither reporter generated worthwhile

coverage of their assigned squadrons. In fact, the only notable Air Force coverage was of the

Predator squadron when they first arrived. Both reporters had unescorted access to the 386

AEW's compound. Instead of being with their assigned squadrons, the two bunkered in the wing

headquarters building for the bulk of their time at Ali Al Salem Air Base.[40] The *Miami Herald*

reporter mustered a scathing editorial of contractors' use of Third Country Nationals to prepare

and serve meals in the dining facility. The *Houston Chronicle* reporter did much worse by

violating OPSEC. He had come across an Air Force reservist who was part of a C-130 crew that

launched Firebee drones over Iraq. The article entailed the unit's purpose, which was to overwhelm the Iraqi integrated air defense system. Despite the reporter requesting a security review of his article, he filed the story immediately. This serves as a reminder of why Airmen must practice security at the source. While some commanders shared classified information with their media embeds in order to broaden the reporters' understanding of the operation, the 386 AEW embeds were not good candidates for this approach. Steps were underway to have the *Houston Chronicle* reporter disembedded. This became moot when the Marines agreed to take both reporters north thus ending their embed status with the 386 AEW.

The 332d Air Expeditionary Wing (332 AEW) based at Al Jaber Air Base in southern Kuwait, had a substantially more visible mission than the 386 AEW in that it had a combination of F-16, A-10, and HH-60 Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) helicopters. Given that heavy operational presence, the 332 AEW hosted more reporters. Despite this wing having a vastly greater kinetic effect role, the reporters shared similar frustrations with the 386 AEW embeds. Gordon Trowbridge, formerly with Air Force Times, and Tara Copp of Scripps-Howard, described during a media panel at the 2003 Air Force Public Affairs Worldwide Conference a frustrating inability to get access to aircrews once the fighting began. At one point, the PAO kept them at a standoff distance when a CSAR helicopter had returned from rescuing a downed pilot. Other locally instituted restrictions and limited access further hampered coverage. By the time the Air Force began staging aircraft from Tallil Air Base in southern Iraq (now called Ali Base) in April 2003, some reporters went north to cover the newly acquired air base, some sought other coverage opportunities in Iraq, and some went home.

Opportunities For The Air Force

With OEF and OIF ongoing, there are still plentiful opportunities to embed media with

Air Force units. Given the current operating locations, restrictions placed by host nations for our

deployment basing do not present the same limiting factors as those used for the initial push into

Iraq. The 332 AEW currently based at Balad Air Base, Iraq has hosted countless news media

representatives. Primarily drawn to the Air Force Theater Hospital (AFTH) located there, most

reporters arrived to cover the trauma medical care available there along with the aeromedical

evacuation (AE) of patients from Iraq to Germany for further medical care.

While this coverage of casualties highlighted lifesaving medical professionalism and

technology, it happened at the almost total exclusion of the other airpower missions staging from

Balad Air Base. By January 2007, frustrated leadership there began conducting media visits as if

they were protocol events for visiting dignitaries. Itineraries saw to it that the reporters toured

units such as the Predator, F-16 and aerial port squadrons, whether the media were interested in

those areas or not. These itineraries became the "cost for admission" for media wishing to cover

the AFTH and AE missions. There were several positive aspects to this, however. First, visiting

media gained a better appreciation for the many missions the Air Force is conducting in Iraq.

Second, by opening the media's eyes to these missions, one could hope additional coverage

would follow. The reality is that most reporters went to Balad Air Base with the intent and focus

on covering battlefield medicine. Some reporters were frustrated in that their limited time at

Balad Air Base went to activities that did not meet that purpose.[41]

During 2005 and 2006, these medical-focused media trips were running at a feverish

pace. A typical AE media trip would originate at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, where the

reporter or reporters would join up with a Public Affairs escort and C-17 aircrew carrying cargo

bound for Iraq. From there they flew to Ramstein Air Base, Germany. Aircrew interviews in the

cockpit during the trans-Atlantic flight afforded the reporter an understanding of the scope and

importance of the AE mission. In Germany, they would remain overnight for crew rest and then proceed to Balad Air Base the following evening. Because there was a substantial amount of media interest in Iraq, reporters would usually have three days on the ground there, before they would depart on a C-17 AE mission back to Ramstein Air Base. Concessions for additional time in Iraq were occasionally necessary depending on the prominence of the media organization and extent of their story. Sometimes, a high patient load would bump the media and escort to a later AE flight. Once in Germany, some media trips concluded depending on the scope of the story. Other trips included the AE flight from Germany to Andrews Air Force Base so patients could receive care at Walter Reed Medical Center.

Having led AMC Public Affairs' Operations Division from November 2005 through August 2007, I was responsible for the planning, coordination, and execution of the flying phases of these media trips. During this timeframe, there were 62 media trips, 27 of which centered on the AE mission.[42] These media trips generated notable coverage for the Air Force. For example, reporter Greg Zorroya's in depth article, "Lifesaving knowledge, innovation emerge from war's deadly violence," was the cover story for the March 28, 2006, USA Today with a photo showing the loading of patients aboard an awaiting C-17. The March 2006 issue of *Men's Health* magazine featured an 11-page story on the AFTH and AE mission. Scott Pelley reporting for *60 Minutes* produced an overwhelmingly positive story on the fight to save lives based on a May 2006 trip. Since late 2006, media interest in the AFTH and AE mission began to drop. The last major trip of this sort took place in January 2007 where NBC science correspondent Robert Bazell covered the battlefield medical care story. At several times, this trip was in jeopardy as the deployed PAO at Balad Air Base failed to follow through on coordinating the visit with his wing leadership.[43] As additional layers of leadership became involved, the trip was on life

support. Lt Gen James Roudebush, the Air Force Surgeon General, elevated the media trip to

Gen T. Michael Moseley, the Air Force Chief of Staff, who in turn pressed for the visit to

happen. While correcting bad staffing was not good use of the Air Force leadership's time, the

trip was successful. NBC Nightly News aired a week's worth of coverage of the Army and Air

Force's battle to save U.S. and Iraqi lives.

Today, Airmen are performing a multitude of "boots on the ground" missions for its

sister services. This translates into embed opportunities for willing reporters. Various transition

teams, law-and-order operations, and combat civil engineer tasks open a vast possibility of

embed opportunities that the Air Force did not previously enjoy when combat in Iraq began in

2003. In September 2007, CNN reporter Gary Tuchman spent a week at Balad Air Base

covering such missions. While he did cover the AFTH, that was limited to one afternoon (at his

discretion). Other stories that he produced and aired on Anderson Cooper 360 included inter-

theater airlift where Tuchman followed a C-130 crew for a day flying hub-and-spoke missions;

police transition teams; and Predator and F-16 ISR missions. All told, the week's worth of

coverage reached an audience of 5.1M people and had an advertising value of $268K.

While embedding reporters in deployed units is an obvious option for the Air Force now,

so too is the opportunity to embed reporters in units remaining at home station. Certainly, this

would not be to the same extent and duration of embedding experienced during OIF. This is

primarily because news media organizations could not commit a reporter to a narrow set of

stories for an extended period. However, short duration embeds could work for both the media

and the Air Force. In February 2003, the 314th Airlift Wing hosted a television anchor from the

Little Rock ABC-affiliate to cover the base for 48 hours. This partnership was advantageous for

both parties in that the media were preparing for sweeps week and the base was able to highlight

its operational, maintenance, and support missions during the spin up for OIF. It is necessary to

note that this visit was not a true embed. While the reporter and his support crew slept and ate

on base for the duration of the visit, a Public Affairs escort was present for facilitating the

interviews and access.

Similar visits conducted as true embeds could prove beneficial to both the reporter and

the Air Force at the wing level and below. First, as seen by coverage generated during OIF,

reporters became intimately familiar with the units they were covering. Although some are

concerned that this hindered media objectivity, reporters nevertheless left with a greater

understanding of the unit they covered. Applying this logic to the home station embedding, that

reporter will have a solid understanding of that unit and be better able to communicate that

understanding during later reporting. Second, media embeds are a force multiplier for the Public

Affairs career field. Following the Program Budget Decision 720 personnel cuts, many Public

Affairs offices were undermanned when factoring in deployments and other personnel issues.[44]

An efficient outreach method for the PAO is to provide media training for the base; invite a

reporter to the base; and embed them into a squadron. That reporter could just as well embed

with AMC aircrews as they fly channel or training missions. The PAO must carefully research

the reporter's background and record of coverage before extending an invitation. The media

outlet's scope and reach is also important. For a base just implementing this concept, starting

with the local military beat reporter may be appropriate to build Airmen's confidence in

engaging the press. Branching out from here, bases should look to regional media outlets.

Gaining attention and participation from national-level could prove difficult. However,

depending upon the nature of the story or location, one may see some success. For example, the

621st Contingency Response Wing (621 CRW) at McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey is

ideally suited. If the 621 CRW is tasked to deploy a Contingency Response Group to open an aerial port in preparation for a humanitarian relief effort, such as in response to a natural disaster, the base's proximity to New York offers a greater likelihood of embedding a national-level reporter to cover the mission.

Air Force senior leadership understands the importance of engaging the media. Reporters have embedded in the Air Force's Corona and AMC's Rally senior leader conferences. Certainly, reporters participating in these conferences were handpicked based on their past reporting ability to impact future coverage of the Air Force. Former Dow Jones Newswire reporter Rebecca Christie embedded with Corona under the auspices that she sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement and agree that her notes would undergo a security review. AMC followed suit by inviting Arkansas-Democrat reporter Amy Schlesing to embed during its Spring Rally. While Schlesing did not have the national reach as Christie, the Arkansas-Democrat had a regional reach and Schlesing had previously embedded with the 463d Airlift Group as it rotated crews and aircraft out of Iraq as well as cover issues affecting the C-130 fleet. For both reporters, these embeds did not generate direct coverage but rather broadened their perspective and understanding of the Air Force and AMC respectively.

Conclusion

One could describe the relationship between the military and the media as an ongoing tug o' war and OPSEC is in the middle. The military is "pulling" to protect its resources from prying enemies. In a post-9/11 world, the requirement for OPSEC is even greater. Meanwhile the media are "pulling" to disclose actions the military is taking. Rather working against each other, the solution is to find a balance between secrecy and openness. It is the responsibility of commanders to determine where the balance lays.

Depending on the nature of the operation, media access simply may not be feasible in order to protect the lives of those Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen fighting the nation's wars. OEF epitomizes such an instance where the need to preserve operational and tactical surprise outweighed the need for reporters to have access to the combat zone. While direct access was not feasible at the beginning of the operation, the military did not go "cold mic." Rather, it engaged the media through other means including frequent interviews and briefings with senior DOD leadership, embarking media aboard Navy ships, and later pooling.

Each conflict has its own character. DOD leadership recognized up front that information would have an even greater role during OIF. Reporters embedded with military units to not only serve as a counter to Iraqi propaganda, but to also show the world community, what coalition forces were accomplishing there. For reporters to do their job, they needed to understand the role and mission of the unit they embedded with in context to the larger operation. This most often entailed commanders sharing classified and sensitive information with their embedded reporters. With just a quick glance, this would seem to violate OPSEC principles. However, about 70 percent of the 700 reporters had access to some type classified or sensitive data; the CPIC involuntarily disembedded less than 30 reporters for violating the ground rules that addressed OPSEC and policy issues. Most reporters do not seek to compromise security or risk lives. They just need a comprehensive set of guidelines and a commander willing to work with them to ensure the maximum disclosure of releasable information with minimal delay.

The Air Force can take advantage of the DOD's success with embedding. Although the Air Force received little press coverage compared to its sister services during OIF, issues that precluded hosting a large number of reporters are gone. Air Force units are currently operating

from four bases in Iraq and are still using Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait. Additionally, the

Air Force has taken on more ground missions that are easier to attach reporters to. There are

opportunities for the Air Force outside of OIF, too. Home station embeds offer some bang for

the buck by using reporters as a force multiplier for the PAO. Finally, as AMC aircraft fly

missions worldwide – to the amount of approximately 900 sorties a day – they too represent an

opportunity to tell the Air Force's story via embedded reporters.

These recommendations are not unique; they expand upon what has worked. By

capitalizing on the success of the DOD's media embed program, the Air Force can better

communicate its roles and responsibilities in the joint fight, while still practicing OPSEC.

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[40] There was no opportunity to cover operations inside the wing headquarters building because the Tactical Operations Center was in a facility outside of the 386 AEW compound.

[41] Briefing, ARANG/C-130 Embed Coverage Assessment, 3 November 2006.

[42] Prior to the author taking charge of the division, there was no formalized method for tracking the effort placed in planning, coordinating, and executing AMC media flights.

[43] Maj Richard Sater, chief, Office of Public Affairs, 332d Air Expeditionary Wing, Balad AB, Iraq, to the author, e-mail, 10 January 2007.

[44] As an unfortunate example of just how dire the manning situation reached, the 22d Air Refueling Wing Public Affairs office at McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas, a senior airman led the PA office during the KC-X selection announcement in February 2008. A captain, mid-grade civilian and several noncommissioned officers had formed the nucleus of PA experience, but due to PBD 720 cuts, deployments and personnel issues they were essentially out of the picture.

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